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"Angola key to understanding earth history"

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Angola is famous for its oil and diamond wealth. But it is also a 'last frontier' for another, less noted treasure: a mindboggling number of prehistoric fossils.

Dozens of mosasaurs, dinosaurs, plesiosaurs, pterosaurs and turtles are excavated over one month each year by a small, international team of paleontologists (PaleoAngola). According to them, 'Angola is the key to understanding the Atlantic rift which separated South America from Africa'.



Professor Jacobs

'The 'Big Five' with the most dinosaur fossils are the US, Canada, Mongolia, China and Argentina,' Dr. Octavio Mateus from the New University of Lisbon pointed out during dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Angola's capital Luanda with PaleoAngola and its sponsors.

"In Portugal, seventh on the list, I find a piece of a skull once every two years. Here, three a day! Since 2005, in the South of Angola the group has discovered roughly ten species of mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, dinosaurs, pterosaurs and turtles." said Mateus.

He uncovered the bones of a sauropod dinosaur north of Luanda in 2005 and also was the first to discover a pterosaur in Sub-Saharan Africa. 'We don't know any other place on earth as rich as this one in vertebrates,' he said. 'Paleontologists will have plenty work in Angola for generations to come.'



A paleontologist at work

The exact location of the findings is a secret. Professor Louis Jacobs from the Southern Methodist University in the US: 'You have to make sure nothing ends up in the wrong hands.'

Angolasaurus

There was electricity in the air that night before the PaleoAngola members travelled back to Portugal and the US to study their newly found fossils

Documentary with a mission

In the past, PaleoAngola has received grants from National Geographic, the Petroleum Research Fund of the American Chemical Society, the Dutch embassy and the Southern Methodist University.

This year's research will be funded entirely by Angolan entities - via, and thanks to Angolan-Canadian filmmaker Kalunga Lima, who is producing an independent documentary on PaleoAngola's findings.

'There was an American professor telling us Angolans about the Angolasaurus,' Lima said. 'That's when I realized it's time to bring this science to a larger Angolan audience.'

Lima describes Angolan society as 'complex, with many interests - little of which has to do with science and almost all of which has to do with mineral wealth'. 'You almost have to trick the system into realizing why this project is worth investing in. By the time the documentary is out this fall, those in charge will realize this is actually quite good for our

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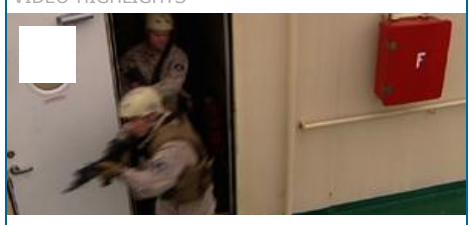
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and bring them back next year. No wonder: Angola's prehistoric treasure has only been unveiled on a larger scale during the last five years. "When the war was going on it never occurred to us to do research in Angola," explained Professor Jacobs. "We only knew there were fossils from a 1964 publication by Professor Antunes from Portugal, baptised Angolasaurus by Mateus.

According to PaleoAngola, Angola is 'probably' the richest country in the world for mosasaurs, or marine lizards. Angolasaurus, a mosasaur, was discovered by the group in 2005.

"The first mosasaur ever was found in 1766. After that, a few dozens were collected over hundreds over years. Here, since 2005 we've found six complete and twelve partial mosasaur skeletons!" says Jacobs.

Mateus: "And there are probably hundreds of them that haven't yet been discovered."



Rich with fossils

Louis: "The same genus of mosasaur has been found in Maastricht, Texas and Angola in 2005. That tells us a lot about their migration."

Dr. Anne Schulp, paleontologist at the Natuurhistorisch Museum Maastricht, is involved in the Angolan project because of the link with the low lands.

Atlantic rift

Angola's geology is related to the rift of the Atlantic 120 million years ago, and PaleoAngola's findings provide important additional evidence for its timing and consequences.

"Some of the first four-legged animals crossed the South Atlantic when South America separated from Africa. Angolachelys for instance, a newly discovered turtle and the oldest African marine turtle. Angola is the key to understanding why and where things were at that time in earth history." says Mateus.

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is actually quite good for our nation: that the country's name will be circulated around the world related to science. It will create a precedent.'

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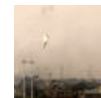


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